

Message Text

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S E C R E T BANGKOK 14008

LIMDIS

WHITE HOUSE FOR DR.PETER BOURNE; DEPT FOR MATHEA FALCO (S/NM)

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: SNAR, TH, BM
SUBJ: REPORT FROM CHIANG MAI ON BURMESE SEIZURE OF THAI POLICE
HELICOPTER AND BPP PERSONNEL

1. FOLLOWING REPORT FROM CONSULATE CHIANG MAI SUPPLEMENTS
INFORMATION CONTAINED IN SEPTTEL PREPARED BY EMBASSY BANGKOK.
ALTHOUGH CHIANG MAI REPORT PRESENTS MUCH OF SAME SCENARIO
TRANSMITTED BY EMBASSY, THE REPORT GIVES GOOD RENDITION OF
LOCAL REACTIONS TO BURMESE SEIZURE OF BORDER PATROL POLICE
HELICOPTER AND PERSONNEL. CHIANG MAI REPORT STATES:

2. A BURMESE MILITARY OPERATION WAS LAUNCHED JUNE 17 AIMED
AT DRIVING SHAN UNITED ARMY FORCES GATHERED ONBURMESE SIDE
OF THAI-BURMESE BORDER OPPOSITE NORTHERN MAE HONG SON PRO-
VINCE INTO THE ARMS OF THE THAI BPP. THIS OPERATION WAS
COORDINATED AT HIGHEST LEVELS OF BOTH THAI AND BURMESE OFFICIAL-
DOM. IT WAS DOUBLY SIGNIFICANT AS IT WAS THE FIRST LARGE-
SCALE BURMESE NARCOTICS SUPPRESSION OPERATION SINCE THE
ILL-FATED MACE (MOHEIN II) OPERATION LAST JANUARY, AND
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THE FIRST-EVER OPERATION IN WHICH ANY ATTEMPT WAS MADE
TO BRIEF THE THAI ON BURMESE TACTICS OR TO GIVE THE BPP
A CHANCE TO ACT AS AN EFFECTIVE BLOCKING FORCE AGAINST
NARCOTICS TRAFFICKERS FLEEING INTO THAILAND. BY JUNE 24
THE BURMESE HAD SUCCEEDED IN DRIVING THE SUA ACROSS THE
BORDER WITH A SIGNIFICANT AMOUNT OF PROCESSED NARCOTICS.
TWO HUNDRED THAI BPP TROOPS WERE DEPLOYED ALONG THE

BORDER TO INTERCEPT THE SUA AND SEIZE THE NEW NARCOTICS CACHES.

3. ON THE MORNING OF JUNE 24 THREE BPP BELL HELICOPTERS APPROACHED A VALLEY NEAR THE ILL-DEFINED THAI-BURMESE BORDER. THE BPP BELIEVED THE VALLEY WAS IN THAILAND, BUT INCLEMENT WEATHER AND A VERY LOW CLOUD COVER MADE IT EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO VERIFY THEIR POSITION. A GROUP OF MEN WAS SIGHTED ON THE GROUND; THE BPP COMMANDER BELIEVED THESE WERE REFUGEES AND INSERTED 27 POLICE TO INTERVIEW THEM. THE MEN ON THE GROUND TURNED OUT TO BE BURMESE TROOPS WHO IMMEDIATELY DISARMED THE THAI. WHEN THIS INFO WAS RADIOED TO THE THREE HELICOPTERS, ONE CRAFT RETURNED AND LANDED. THE COPTER, TWO PILOTS AND ONE ADDITIONAL CREWMEMBER WERE SEIZED. LATEST REPORTS INDICATE THE SITE IS INDEED 500 METERS INSIDE BURMA.

4. THE BURMESE INITIALLY DEMANDED HIGH-LEVEL NEGOTIATIONS AT THE SITE OF THE INCIDENT AND INFORMED THE BPP THEY WERE SENDING TO RANGOON FOR AN APPROPRIATE REPRESENTATIVE. THE RTA AREA 3 COMMANDER, LT. GEN SOMSAK PANCHAMANOND, FLEW TO MAE HONG SON JUNE 26 FOR A DETAILED BRIEFING. LATE THAT SAME DAY THE BURMESE CUT OFF ALL

COMMUNICATIONS BETWEEN THE CAPTURED HELICOPTER AND THE BPP. AS OF THE MORNING OF JUNE 27, THE BURMESE ARE STILL HOLD-
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ING THE COPTER AND 27 BPP TROOPS. THERE HAVE BEEN NO FURTHER DEMANDS FOR A THAI NEGOTIATOR, AND THE SITUATION APPEARS TO BE AT AN IMPASSE.

5. THE LOCAL THAI REACTION TO THE SEIZURE IS INCREDIBLY MIXED WITH BITTERNESS. CONSOFF SPOKE WITH SEVERAL BPP COMMANDERS AT A SOCIAL FUNCTION EVENING OF JUNE 25, ALL OF WHOM EXPRESSED AMAZEMENT THAT SUCH AN INCIDENT COULD OCCUR DURING A SUPPOSEDLY "JOINT" OPERATION. THE BPP OFFICERS HERE WERE INITIALLY CONVINCED THAT THE DISPUTED AREA WAS ACTUALLY TWO TO THREE HUNDRED METERS INSIDE THAILAND, AND SEVERAL WONDERED ALOUD WHETHER THE BURMESE WERE IN FACT SPOILING FOR WAR. AN ADDED IRONY IS THAT DURING THE ILL-FATED MACE OPERATION LAST JANUARY, THE BURMESE ARMY INTRUDED FULLY NINE KILOMETERS INSIDE THAI TERRITORY, AN EVENT THAT WAS RECEIVED WITH OUTRAGE LOCALLY AT THE TIME, YET THE BPP WENT TO GREAT LENGTHS TO NEGOTIATE A SAFE WITHDRAWAL FOR THE BURMESE.

6. A MAJOR DIFFICULTY OF THE ENTIRE AFFAIR IS THAT NARCOTICS SUPPRESSION, THE REASON FOR THE OPERATION, MAY BE DAMAGED, ESPECIALLY IF THE EVENTUAL THAI-BURMESE

NEGOTIATIONS ARE AT ALL LENGTHY OR CONTENTIOUS.
LOCAL BPP COMMANDERS CONSIDER THE SAFE RECOVERY OF THE
HELICOPTER AND THE THAI POLICE AS THEIR FIRST PRIORITY
AND THE MAJORITY OF THEIR EFFORTS ARE NOW DIRECTED TO THAT
END. IN ADDITION, THE SEIZED TROOPS REPRESENT A MAJOR
PORTION OF THE FORCE INTENDED FOR NARCOTICS SUPPRESSION.
WITHIN THESE RESTRICTIONS, HOWEVER, THERE IS STILL A
STRONG COMMITMENT TO NARCOTICS SUPPRESSION; GEN . PHAO
SARASIN AND MAJOR GEN. WICHAI WICHAITHANAPAN (BPP COMMANDER IN THE
AAREA) BOTH STRSSED THEIR INTENTION TO PURSUE THE NARCOTICS
TRAFFICKERS, AND A LIMITED BPP FORCE IS PRESENTLY COMBING THE
GOUGH TERRAIN OF MAE HONG SON PROVINCE NEAR THE BORDER.

7. IN THE LONG RUN THE MOST SERIOUS EFFECT OF THIS IN-
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CIDENT IS LIKELY TO BE THE FURTHER UNDERMINING OF THAI-
BURMESE RELATIONS. WHILE MUTUAL TRUST HAS NEVER BEEN
GREAT BETWEEN THE TWO NATIONS, IN THIS CASE THE THAI WERE
GENUINELY WILLING TO COOPERATE WITH THE BURMESE, EVEN
THOUGH THEY WERE NOT BROUGHT IN ON THE OPERATION UNTIL
AFTER THE BURMESE TROOPS STARTED TO MOVE AGAINST THE
SUA. THIS TIME IT WAS THE BURMESE WHO WERE SO DISTRUST-
FUL OF THAI INTENTIONS THAT THEY SERIOUSLY OVER-REATED
IN A DOUBTFUL SITUATION. WHETHER THE SEIZURE TOOK PLACE
ON THAI OR BURMESE TERRITORY IS INSIGNIFICANT COMPARED TO
THE FACT THAT THE RESPECTIVE COMMANDERS ON THE TACTICAL
LEVEL APPEARED TO BE UNABLE TO TRUST EACH OTHER ENOUGH TO WORK
TOGETHER, EVEN FOR NARCOTICS SUPPRESSION. THIS SITUATION
IS ALL THE MORE DISTRESSING SINCE THIS IS THE FIRST TIME
SUCH A COORDINATED OPERATION HAS BEEN ATTEMPTED. EVEN IF
THIS OPERATION IS SALVAGED BY THE SEIZURE OF SOME AMOUNT
OF NARCOTICS, LOCAL COMMANDERS WILL LIKELY BE HESITANT TO
CONSIDER ANOTHER SUCH OPERATION ANY TIME IN THE NEAR
FUTURE.
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